

GREEN LIVING

By Cile Downs

Composting For Beginners

A friend tells me she is exceedingly fond of compost, but she has no time to manage a compost heap. Here's my advice to her: Composting is something Nature has been doing for about 450 million years. It's a natural process. As with most natural processes, if you don't mess with it, it proceeds inexorably at its own rate, sometimes faster, sometimes slower, depending on temperature, moisture and how big the pile of leaves, or whatever, is. It is messy, wasteful and inconsistent. The leaves at the bottom rot faster; the ones on the outer edge may take years or until they wind up at the bottom of a new pile. But in the long run the busy bacteria do their work, not to speak of the industrious funguses, turning everything, absolutely everything, that has grown out of the earth, or lived on it, back into earth. Everything means grass, weeds, vegetables, manure, mighty oaks, bunnies, birdies, and, given a chance, you and me. This is how Nature perpetually renews earth's fertility.



Composting can be undertaken by people in low-tech and high-tech ways. A backyard compost heap is necessarily very low-tech though it has various degrees of efficiency depending on how much time and effort you want to spend. Basically, you throw everything you have that will rot: lawn clippings, weeds, wood ashes, garbage, (including meat scraps if it's inside a fence so animals are kept out – mine is inside the deer fence of my vegetable garden) on a heap, confining it with chicken-wire or rat-wire so it won't overflow all over the place, and in order to deepen the heap. If this smells temporarily, or looks bad, cover the garbage with a spade-full of dirt or a bunch of weeds or

clippings. Sticks and branches are really too slow to rot, and make it all hard to handle if you turn it. Paper will biodegrade, but most of it can be recycled, which is better. A garbage can of chicken manure alongside the heap supplies a periodic sprinkle of encouragement. It may be true, as some say, that manure put directly on plants will burn them; if processed through your compost heap it turns into something that can never burn anything. A moist and sufficiently large heap will heat up nicely in the process of decay, so make sure to sprinkle it when you're watering the garden if it hasn't rained for a while. If you are strong and energetic, you can turn the heap with a pitchfork periodically, to get the outside into the inside, so that it all gets a chance to rot completely and heat up enough to kill weed seeds and disease organisms.

The less energetic, like this writer, let Nature take its slower, messy, wasteful course, knowing that some of the nutrients produced in that lovely humus (totally broken-down compost) will leach down into the ground before the stuff on top even starts to rot. We don't care. It's all to the good, one way or another. Don't put diseased plants on the heap if you're not prepared to ensure that it heats. If you haven't killed the weed seeds, use a mulch to keep weeds down wherever you spread that compost. The point is, you don't have to make a profession out of this if you don't choose to. Nothing except nuclear holocaust would stop good old Nature.

I once wondered, why not dig a pit in the ground to make compost in, so I won't have to fence it to hold it up? An experiment with this showed me why not. When it rained the heap turned to soup and commenced to decay anaerobically (meaning without air). It decayed, all right, producing a fierce aroma, and that was the end of that experiment.

High-tech composting is typified by the up-to-date composting plant like East Hampton's. It is incredibly fast, and preserves the nutrients through the whole process. Being uniformly heated throughout, weed seeds and disease organisms are eliminated, which means that you could compost food garbage in it. However, people being what they are, you would seldom get just compostables brought in, but materials that will rot mixed with plastic, glass and even cans. If somebody has to pick those things out, the process gets expensive. I understand the Town just composts leaves, clippings and so forth now, which must tend to be cleaner. The final product, when made available at the recycling center, doesn't last long. People like me are allowed to take it away by the garbage-can load. I can't imagine a better lawn treatment, fertilizing the grass without over-doing the nitrates and building the soil at the same time. Free, too.

All the same, I wouldn't give up my own compost heap for anything. In the spring, I take the undecayed top off the old heap and make it the bottom layer of the next year's heap. Then, reversing the order, more and more broken-down layers go on the new heap, until I get to the compost. The pleasure of smelling it alone makes it all worthwhile. It smells like woods earth (what's under the leaves in the woods) and it is more or less pure humus. When I put it into a row of vegetables, or around the perennials, I imagine how those plants are going to love it. It cost me nothing, handling it is a pleasure, it's the pure gold of gardeners. What more could you ask?

